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General

MORRIS LOUIS

MORRIS LOUIS
1912-1962

MEMORIAL EXHIBITION
PAINTINGS FROM 1954-1960

THE SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK

Published by The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1963
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The American painter Morris Louis died in 1962 at the age of 50. Well before his death—perhaps as early as 1954—his painting had reached a level of accomplishment that marked Louis as one of the most inventive and daring among those artists of the New York School who were then in the ascendancy and who have since moved into full recognition.

This exhibition, presented by the Guggenheim Museum's Curator, Mr. Lawrence Alloway, avoids the usual retrospective pattern in favor of a selection designed to reveal a fine, though insufficiently known, phase of his work. The 17 paintings included fall within a period beginning in 1954 and ending in 1960.

Although only a few examples are shown, their exceptional size and their strength are intended to convey in its fullness the artist's remarkable contribution.

Thomas M. Messer, Director, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to Mrs. Marcella Louis, the artist's widow, for her interest in this exhibition; without her support it could not have taken place. Mr. Clement Greenberg, Mr. Kenneth Noland, and Professor William Rubin have been generous with advice, both professionally and as personal friends of the artist.

I would like to thank the following members of the Museum's staff for their indispensable contribution to the catalogue: Carol Fuerstein, editor of the catalogue and, with Maurice Tuchman, compiler of the bibliography; Alice Hildreth, who worked closely on every phase of the exhibition; and Orrin Riley, for his skillful handling of the problems of presentation connected with this exhibition.

L. A.

LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Mr. and Mrs. Clement Greenberg, New York
Mrs. Maximilian Le Witter, New York
Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D.C.
Professor William Rubin, New York
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Slifka, New York

André Emmerich Gallery, New York
Galerie Lawrence, Paris

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. TERRAIN OF JOY. 1954. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 79⅛ x 105⅛".
   Collection Mrs. Maximilian Le Witter, New York.

2. SALIENT. 1954. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 74⅝ x 99¼".
   Collection Professor William Rubin, New York.

3. SPREADING. 1954. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 79⅛ x 97".
   Collection Mr. and Mrs. Clement Greenberg, New York.

4. INTRIGUE. 1954. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 77½ x 105⅛".
   Collection Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Slifka, New York.

5. UNTITLED. 1958. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 91½ x 142⅝".
   Lent by Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.
   Courtesy of André Emmerich Gallery, New York, and Galerie Lawrence, Paris.

6. UNTITLED. 1958. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 98 x 132".
   Lent by Galerie Lawrence, Paris.

7. UNTITLED. 1958. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 91⅞ x 140".
Lent by Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.
Courtesy of André Emmerich Gallery, New York.

8. UNTITLED. 1958-1959. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 99⅝ x 139½".
Lent by Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.
Courtesy of André Emmerich Gallery, New York, and Galerie Lawrence, Paris.

9. UNTITLED. 1958-1959. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 91⅝ x 156".
Lent by Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.
Courtesy of André Emmerich Gallery, New York.

10. SARABAND. 1959. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 100½ x 149".
Collection Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.

11. UNTITLED. 1959. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 139⅛ x 90¾".
Lent by Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.
Courtesy of André Emmerich Gallery, New York, and Galerie Lawrence, Paris.

12. UNTITLED. 1959. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 103 x 141⅝".
Lent by Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.
Courtesy of André Emmerich Gallery, New York.

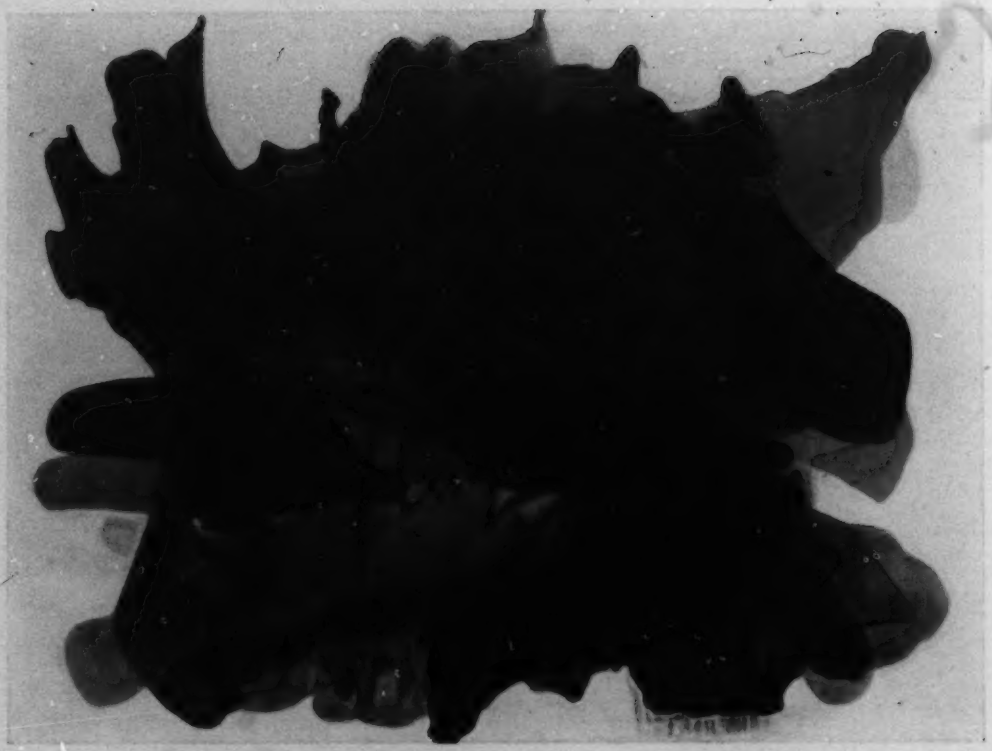
13. FLORAL. 1959. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 101 x 142⅛".
Collection Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.

14. UNTITLED. 1959-1960. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 98⅝ x 141⅛".
Lent by Galerie Lawrence, Paris.

15. WHILE. 1959-1960. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 96½ x 136⅜".
Collection Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.

16. UNTITLED A. 1960. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 104 x 80¼".
Lent by Galerie Lawrence, Paris.

17. UNTITLED. 1960. Acrylic resin paint on canvas, 104⅝ x 201⅝".
Lent by Mrs. Marcella Louis, Washington, D. C.
Courtesy of André Emmerich Gallery, New York, and Galerie Lawrence, Paris.



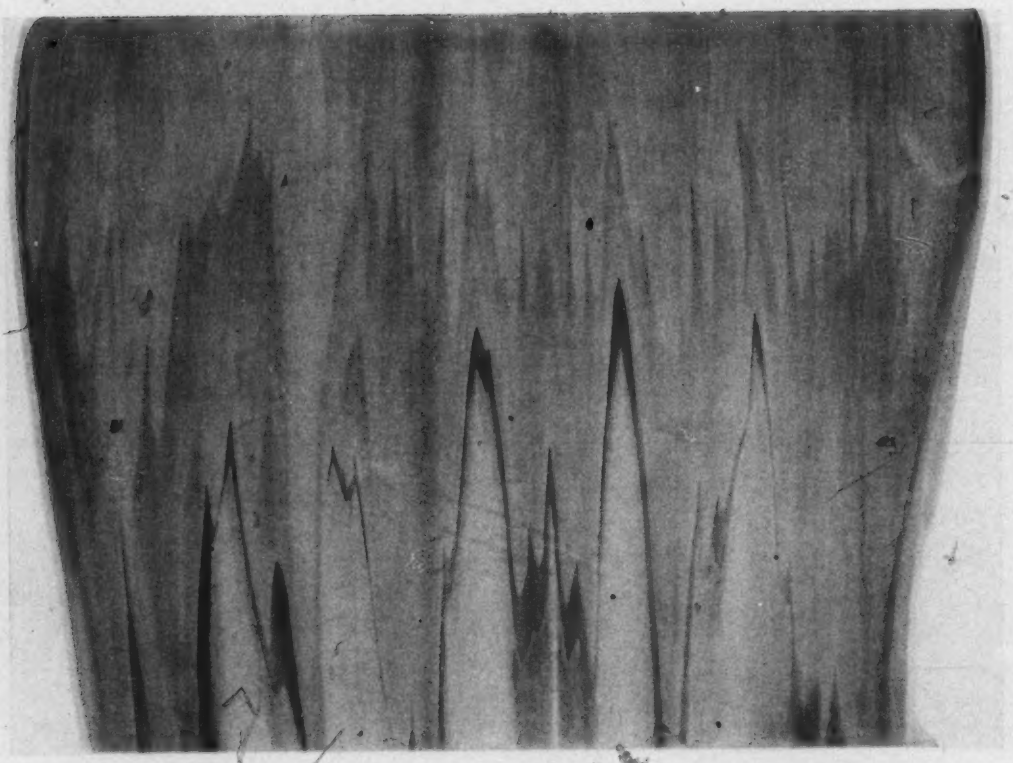
1. Terrain of Joy. 1954.

2. Salient. 1954.

3. Spreading. 1954.

4. Intrigue. 1954.

5. Untitled. 1958.



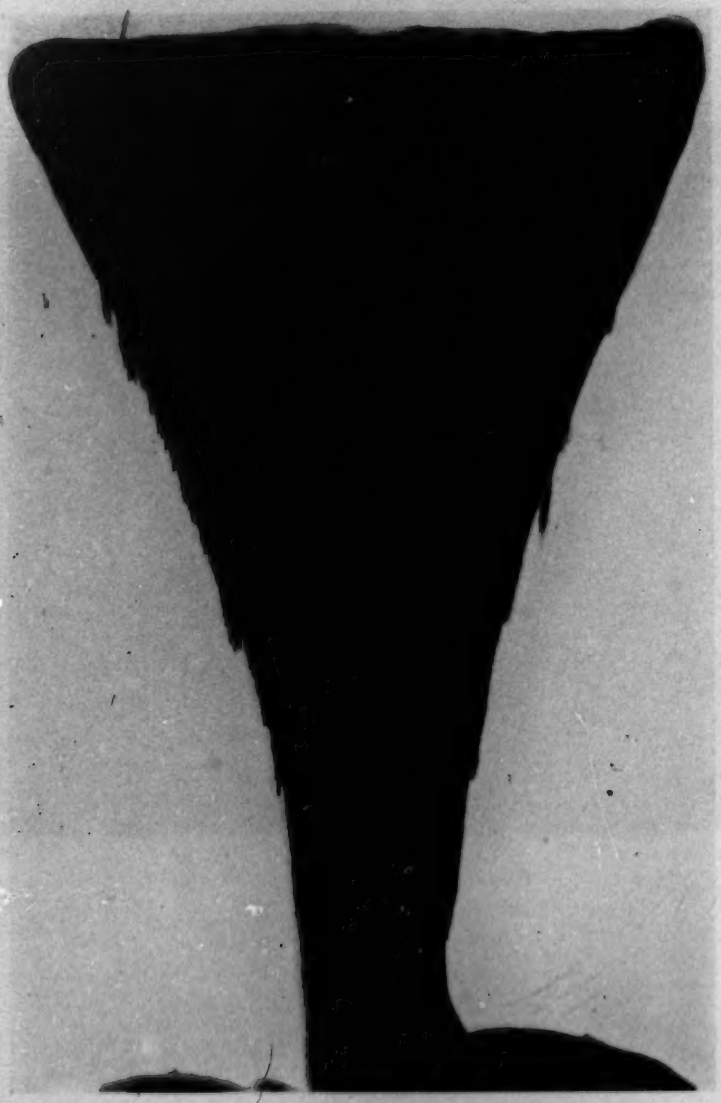
6. Untitled. 1958.

7. Untitled. 1958.

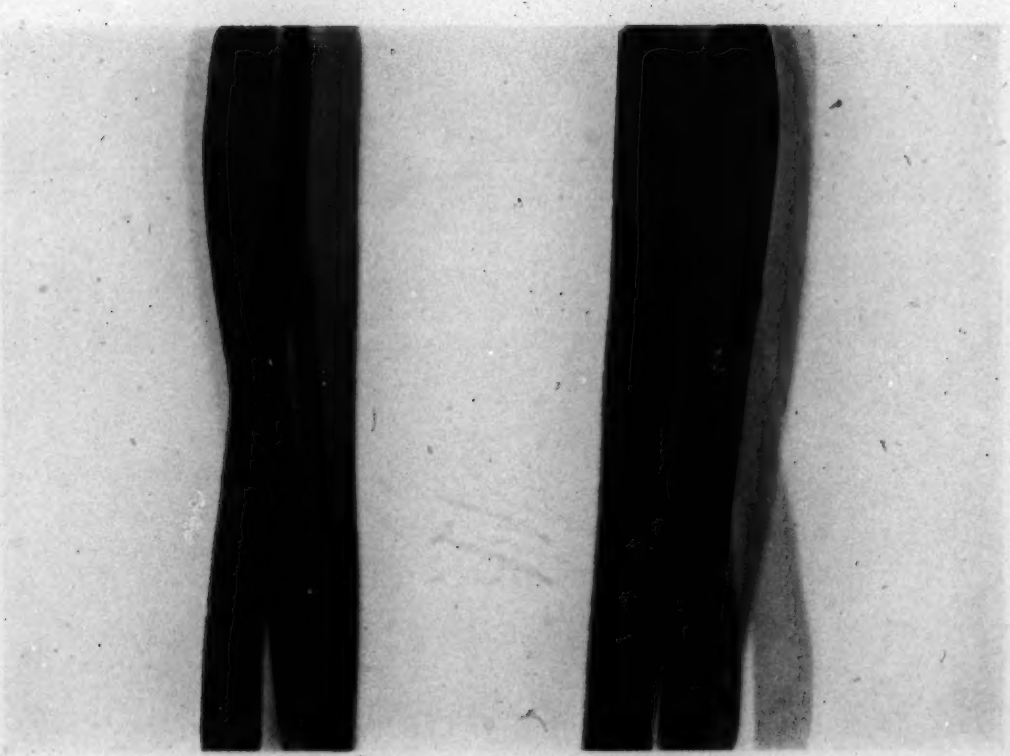
8. Untitled. 1958-1959.

9. *Untitled*. 1958-1959.

10. Saraband. 1959.



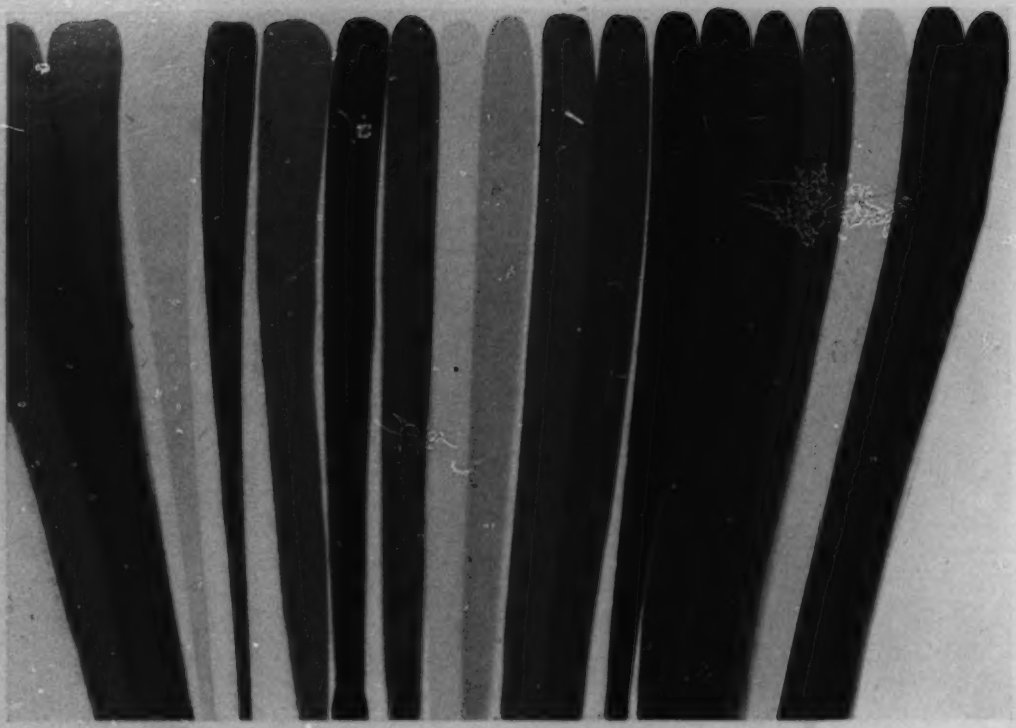
11. Untitled. 1959.



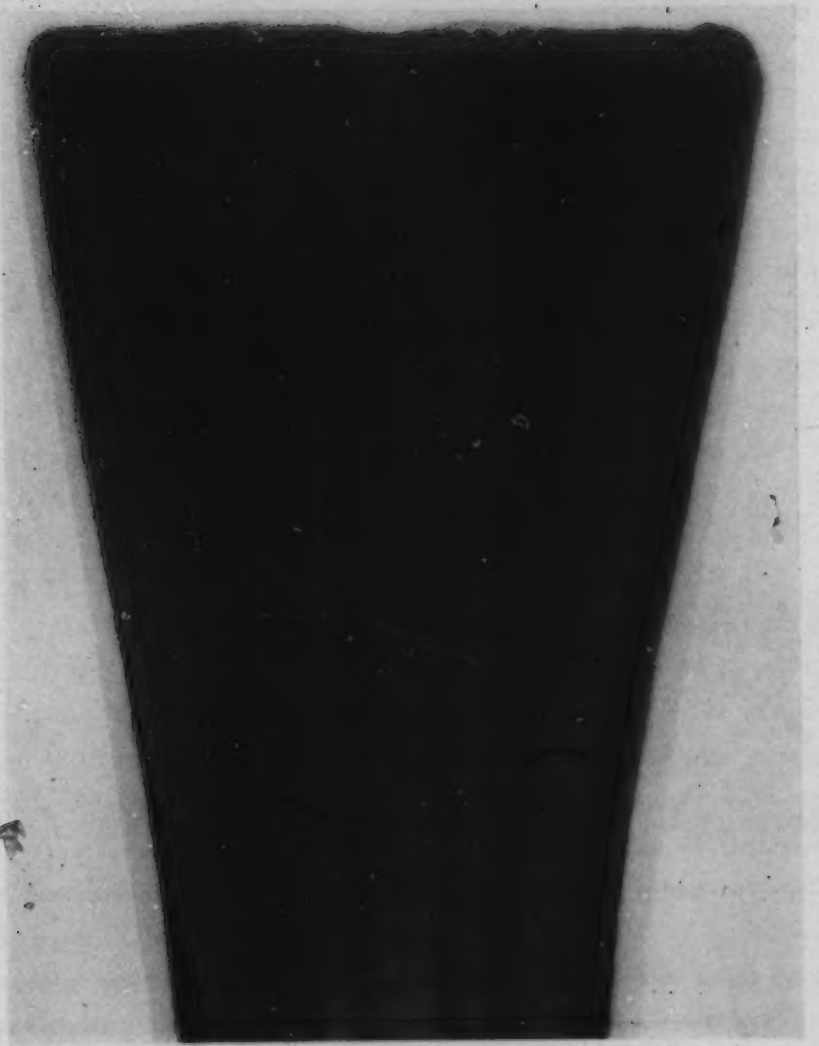
12. Untitled. 1959.

13. Floral.-1959.

14. Untitled. 1959-1960.



15. While. 1959-1960.



16. Untitled A. 1960.

NOTES ON MORRIS LOUIS

Although ours is apparently a period of total information, withdrawal and secrecy are still possible. In fact, as information increases, the area of our ignorance dilates, also. At the present time, for example, the life work of such artists as Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still is known only in partial and fragmentary form. The case of Morris Louis is similar. A list of his exhibitions and his bibliography reveals a gradual ascent from a local to an international reputation. At the same time, the bibliography, though fairly numerous, shows that an artist can still live out of sight behind his notices and, even, behind his exhibitions.

This memorial exhibition, like all other displays of Louis to date, is not comprehensive. The work on view samples two major, and connected, phases of his work. The first group of paintings comes from 1954, the year in which he seems to have established his characteristic style. The second, and more numerous, group comes from 1958 to 1960 (two years before his death). In this second period he resumed and substantially developed the technique and imagery of 1954. The work between (1955-1956), praised by Michel Tapié as *art informel*, was mostly destroyed by the artist.[1] The athletic, rather hectic, handling of the work of these two years failed subsequently to satisfy Louis; he repented of the explosive activity of these paintings and returned to a flatter, more continuous, surface. This is the logic of showing work from these two periods together.

Generations are variously measured, but a decade is certainly an arguable unit. Reduction of the time-span of a generation to a decade fits the fact that a great generation of American painters was born between 1903 and 1913. At various points in the later 40s and early 50s, the painters born in this particular ten-year span made their decisive contributions to our painting. The continuing vitality of New York painting is strongly indebted to both the early example of that generation and to the later work

1. For a reproduction of a painting of this period, see: Tapié, Michel. *Morphologie Autre*, Turin, 1960 (unpaged).

17. Untitled. 1960.

of its original members. Whether as a result of an obscure confluence of talent and history, whether as a consequence of age and experience, the art of this generation continues to be the most remarkable of the last twenty years. One painter may be proposed as an addition to their company, though he contributed to it later than the others, and in isolation from their milieu, Morris Louis.

Louis came to attention slowly in the late 50s and his work is still largely unseen and unassimilated. There are two reasons for suggesting that he is relatable to the original generation, rather than to the numerous younger artists and later arrivals. First is the fact that his art shares formal characteristics stated by the 1903-1913 generation, which include large size, sensitivity to the material properties of paint, and a powerful use of color. Second is the fact that his art has an emotional fullness and resonance which parallels the grandeur attained by the art of this generation. There is a majestic power, derived from the interplay of simplicity and intensity of feeling which characterizes the best of their work.[2] Thus, both formally and expressively, and in the way that the technique embodies the human content, connections may be made between Louis and the 1903-1913 generation. Clement Greenberg records that on a visit to New York from Washington, D.C., where he lived and worked, Louis was influenced by "the middle-period Pollocks and . . . a large and extraordinary painting done in 1952 by Helen Frankenthaler called *Mountains and Sea*".[3] Louis visited New York with Kenneth Noland, whom he had met in Washington in 1953, and it was Noland who introduced him to Clement Greenberg. On their return to Washington, they painted counter to the Abstract Expressionist style, then prevailing in New York (and lasting until 1959 or 1960). (I would restrict the term Abstract Expressionism to refer to the work of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, and their various followers.)

Louis, from all accounts, lived for his painting, in a way that left him neither time nor energy for anything else. Noland, who considers himself prolific, remembers that at one time Louis seemed to be painting twenty works to Noland's one. He was completely engrossed in his activity as a painter, rising early and working late, in a small room at the back of

2. One account of this emotional power is given in "The American Sublime," *Living Arts*, 2, London, 1963 (p. 11-22), by the present writer.
3. Greenberg, Clement. "Louis and Noland," *Art International*, Zürich, vol. 4, no. 5, May, 1960, p. 26-29.

his house in a suburb of Washington. His biography is uneventful, except for the enormous and never-ending activity of painting. Although he destroyed many works, a great number were stored in the cellar of his house at his death. (Most of the later paintings in the present exhibition, loaned by Mrs. Louis, are from this previously unshown group.) The only people that he saw regularly, apart from his students, were Greenberg and Noland, and his contact with them was essential to him as an artist. They seem to have acted as his companions in a dialogue, with the functions of informing and testing his ideas and feelings. Such a dialogue, which had a great bearing on Louis' work, is often indispensable to an artist, a mitigation of the solitude in which he has to work.

Like the other members of the 1903-1913 generation, Louis remained, for all his innovations, within the technical limits of painting. He did not, and neither did the other artists, experiment by increasing collage or object elements in the work of art. On the contrary, like Pollock or Newman or Still, Louis retained unity of surface and technical consistency of medium. He pursued the fundamental characteristic of painting, the creation of space by means of paint, and he simultaneously countered the illusion of space by his retention of the flat plane of the canvas. He achieved this traditional compound of two- and three-dimensional space by untraditional means. He worked with his canvas unstretched in a horizontal plane, sloping and folding it to cause the paint to spread over, or flow directionally across, the unsized and unprimed cotton duck canvas. The largest canvases could not be worked on all at once, owing to the small size of the studio, and occasional traces of this awkwardness are visible, as folds, as lines where the paint flow has been started again.

As the paintings were only provisionally stretched, a problem arises about their stretching. The newly-stretched canvases in this exhibition have been turned closer to the painted image than was usually the case before, thus reducing the area of bare canvas. The fact that the boundaries of the paintings were undetermined for a while does not mean that Louis, creating his big flaring image, was indifferent to the limits of each painting. On the contrary, examination of the canvases usually reveals

clear signs of the artist's decision, in the form of staple punctures or creases made by Louis himself while working. The edges were located during work on, or after completion, of the painting, but this does not mean that the procedure was arbitrary. The area on which an artist paints need not be absolute throughout the creative act, as can be seen, for instance, from paintings by Velasquez and Rubens, to which additional strips of canvas or panel were added, according to the demands of the growing image.

Louis exploited the liquidity of paint to an unprecedented extent.[4] Much diluted, his pigment was soaked up by his absorbent canvas, so that the paint acted as a dye rather than as a paste. The paint was laid with the aid of gravity, so that the hand of the artist is not felt, as it is in de Kooning, Guston, or Kline, in terms of pressure and the resistance of surface. The apparent indirection of his method of painting, however, meant no suspension of personal decision; it is simply that the decisions are not recorded gesturally within the painting. The whole area of the completed painting is not reducible to smaller components which can be equated either with signs for known objects or with personal handwriting. As in Still, Newman, and Rothko, the painting must be seen as a single field, a field not devoid of incident but, equally, not reducible to a scale of different sized forms and marks.

Of the Field Painters, to call them by this term to separate them from the Abstract Expressionists (both groups being born in 1903-1913), Pollock was, of course, known to Louis and, probably, Clyfford Still. Still's huge continuous planes of color were known to Louis as something to reckon with in his own work. Newman, on the other hand, was little known at this time, though many of his important works had already been painted. According to Noland, Newman was known in Washington by repute and rumor, rather than by the knowledge of actual works. (It was only after 1958 that Newman's work gained currency, though through Greenberg, Louis would have kept in touch, implicitly, with the esthetic, with the kind of opinion, that Still, Newman, and Rothko represented.)

Louis' paintings of 1954 are composed of soft overlapping flurries of transparent color, running in various directions before depositing their color traces on the parched cloth. These paintings, with their interplay of

4. Leonard Bocour, artists' color maker and personal friend of the painter, records that he made for Louis a specially soft and liquid version of Magna color, the plastic-based paint Louis used. He also supplied him with quantities of the original medium, an acrylic resin, so that Louis could dilute the paint still further.

directional tides, however much they tremble on the dissolution of the surface, hold it because of the persistent thread of the canvas and the transparency of the paint. In 1957-1958, after the gestural interruption, he resumed this kind of flat yet dissolving surface, in somber tongues and deltas of warm earthy color. These paintings are almost always of forms on a vertical axis within a horizontal format. The color areas are dark and rich, as a rule, but within the simple contours transparent layers of paint echo one another, revealing only at the edges the radiance of the individual color. Some of these forms flow in, apparently, a single wave; others have several foci, from which the colors flow and mingle; still others separate out, like a crown. All these paintings preserve basic north-south, east-west axes (as have most American painters of this generation in their work), presumably to stabilize the great expansive fields of color, but also to be formally inconspicuous. Most of the paintings, despite the brilliance of individual hues, have a somber resonance, evocative of the earth, despite the liquidity of the paint and the diaphanous properties of the image. The words most often used, both by art critics and by journalists, about Louis' art, are "veils" and "drapes". The terms are apt, obvious even, not only because of the preservation of the canvas as part of the paint (never hidden under solid paint), but, also, because of the configuration of the paint trails. These are continuous and undulant. Like veils, the thin washes of color are continually overlaid, which produces a shifting density and a subtle, reserved, internal color relationship.

In 1959, Louis resumed the irregular bunching of color planes typical of the 1954 canvases, but with a new solidity and amplitude of color. These paintings, called after the title of one of them, are known as the "Floral" group. Gradually his color became firmer, even when the forms of his softly stained paintings persisted until in late 1959 or 1960 he began the paintings with adjacent stripes of rich color. These led to open, fanned out ribbons of separated color. From this point Louis moved to the best-known phase of his work, the columns of solid color, usually vertical, but occasionally diagonal. However, since the purpose of this exhibition is to emphasize a major but neglected period of Louis' work, these last paintings are not included.

Lawrence Alloway

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Ahlander, Leslie Judd. "The Emerging Art of Washington," *Art International*, Zürich, vol. 6, no. 9, November, 1962, p. 31.

Kosloff, Max. "A Letter to the Editor," *Art International*, Zürich, vol. 7, no. 6, June 25, 1963, p. 88-92.

EXHIBITIONS, CATALOGUES AND REVIEWS

*denotes one-man show

1948 *Maryland Artists, 16th Annual Exhibition*, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, February 29-April 4, 1948.
Catalogue. (one gouache)

1949 *Baltimore National Watercolor Exhibition*, sponsored by the Baltimore Watercolor Club and the Baltimore Museum of Art.
Catalogue. (one watercolor and gouache)

Maryland Artists, 17th Annual Exhibition, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, March 25-April 17.
Catalogue. (one painting)

Fourth Annual Area Exhibition, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Catalogue: *The Corcoran Gallery of Art Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 1, November, 1949. (one painting)

1950 *Maryland Artists, 18th Annual Exhibition*, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, April 23-May 21.
Catalogue. (three works: one painting, two collages)

Life in Baltimore, 10th Annual Painting Show, The Peale Museum, Baltimore, October 29-December 10.
Catalogue: *The Peale Museum Bulletin*, Baltimore, vol. 11, no. 4, November, 1950. (one painting)

1952 *Maryland Artists, 20th. Annual Exhibition*, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, April 6-27.
Catalogue. (one painting)

1953 **Morris Louis*, Workshop Art Center Gallery, Washington, D. C., April 12-30.
Catalogue with "Statement on the Artist" by Leon Berkowitz. (sixteen paintings plus drawings)
Reviews: Portner, Leslie Judd. "Art in Washington, 'The Workshop and the Watkins'," *Washington Post*, Washington, D. C., February 1, 1953, p. 5L.
Portner, Leslie Judd. "One a Newcomer, One a Veteran," *Washington Post*, Washington, D. C., April 12, 1953, p. 32.

1954 *Emerging Talent*, Kootz Gallery, New York, January 11-30.
Gallery announcement with note by Clement Greenberg.
Reviews: Fitzsimmons, James. "A critic picks some promising painters," *Art Digest*, New York, vol. 28, no. 8, January 15, 1954, p. 10.
Preston, Stuart. "Gallery Variety," *New York Times*, New York, January 17, 1954.
Burrows, Carlyle. "Art Review," *New York Herald Tribune*, New York, January 24, 1954.

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Review: Portner, Leslie Judd. "Art in Washington," *Washington Post*, Washington, D. C., March 14, 1954.

Abstractions, Barnett Aden Gallery, Washington, D. C., May 15-September 15.
Checklist. (one painting)

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Review: Portner, Leslie Judd. "Art in Washington," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, Washington, D. C., June 5, 1955, p. E 7.

**Morris Louis*, Workshop Center of the Arts, Washington, D. C., October 5-24.
Checklist. (nine paintings)
Review: Portner, Leslie Judd. "Art in Washington," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, Washington, D. C., October 16, 1955, p. E 7.

1956 *Contemporary Artists Group*, Barnett Aden Gallery, Washington, D. C., January 7-February.
Checklist. (one painting)

1957 *New Work at Leo Castelli Gallery*, New York, May 6-25.
Reviews: Ashton, Dore. "Art," Arts and Architecture, Los Angeles, vol. 74, no. 7, July, 1957, p. 33.
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**Martha Jackson Gallery*, New York, November 5-23.
Catalogue with introduction by Michel Tapié de Céléran. (twelve paintings)
Reviews: Ashton, Dore. "Art: Large Abstractions," *New York Times*, New York, November 5, 1957, p. 38.
C. B. [Carl Baldwin] "Morris Louis," *Arts*, New York, vol. 32, December, 1957, p. 60.

Martha Jackson Gallery Exhibition, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Autumn.
Review: Sawyer, Kenneth B. "Art Notes: The 'Second Generation' Aspect," *The Sun*, Baltimore, November 10, 1957.

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Gutai 9, The International Art of a New Era: U.S.A., Japan, Europe (special number for Osaka Festival 1958), Kyoto, 1958, p. 68. 1 painting illustrated.
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1959 **Morris Louis*, French and Company, Inc., New York, April.
Catalogue. (twenty-three paintings)
Reviews: C. B. [Carlyle Burrows] "Morris Louis Exhibition," *New York Herald Tribune*, New York, April 12, 1959, Section 4, p. 6.
H. C. [Hubert Crehan] "Morris Louis," *Art News*, New York, vol. 58, April, 1959, p. 58.
M. S. [Martica Sawin] "Morris Louis," *Arts*, New York, vol. 33, May, 1959, p. 58, 59.
Preston, Stuart. "Sculpture and Paint," *New York Times*, New York, April 26, 1959, p. 17.
Sawin, Martica. "New York Letter," *Art International*, Zürich, vol. 5, 6, 1959, p. 48, 49.

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Checklist. (three paintings)

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Checklist. (twenty-one paintings)
Reviews: Ashton, Dore. "Art: Battle of Elements," *New York Times*, New York, March 31, 1960.
C. B. [Carlyle Burrows] "Art Exhibition Notes," *New York Herald Tribune*, New York, March 26, 1960.
D. J. [Donald Judd] "Exhibition at French and Co. Gallery," *Arts*, New York, vol. 34, April, 1960, p. 58.
L. C. [Lawrence Campbell] "Exhibition at French Gallery," *Art News*, New York, vol. 59, May, 1960, p. 14.

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Reviews: Sylvester, David. "Selected Exhibitions (ICA)," *New Statesman*, London, May 28, 1960, p. 789.
Coleman, Roger. "Morris Louis Exhibition at the I.C.A. Gallery," *Arts Review*, London, vol. 12, no. 10, June 4, 1960, p. 4.

**Morris Louis*, Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont, October 19-November 15.
Checklist. (six paintings)

*Morris Louis, Galleria dell'Ariete, Milan, November.
Catalogue with introduction by Clement Greenberg (reprinted from *Art International*, vol. 4, no. 5, May, 1960). (eight paintings)

1960-61 *From Space to Perception,* Rome-New York Art Foundation, Inc., Rome, November-February.
Catalogue with introduction by Michel Tapié (in French, English, Italian). (two paintings reproduced)
Review: Gendel, Milton. "From Space to Perception at the Rome-New York Art Foundation," *Art News,* New York, vol. 61, January, 1962, p. 55.

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Review: Ashbery, John. "Paris Notes," *Art International,* Zürich, vol. 4, May 1, 1961, p. 63.
Group Exhibition, American Embassy, London, Spring.
**Morris Louis,* André Emmerich Gallery, New York, October 3-21 (ten paintings)
Reviews: "Exhibition at Emmerich Gallery," *Arts,* New York, vol. 36, November, 1961, p. 47.
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All photographs were taken by Robert E. Mates

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